

# The Circuit Writer



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Northern New Jersey Conference, The United Methodist Church

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ABOUT NEW JERSEY METHODISM: "NORTHERN NEW JERSEY CAMP MEETINGS  
AND MOUNT TABOR"

by  
Dr. Robert Drew Simpson

In the earlier days of our nation "camp meeting" was one of the most successful weapons in the armory of evangelism. It was first brandished as a strategy of the American Church during the Cumberland Revival which began under the zealous preaching of James McGready, a Presbyterian minister. The revival, sweeping through Methodist as well as Presbyterian circles, reached its peak in the summer of 1800. Incredibly large numbers streamed out of the rough frontier settlements to an encampment where the unleashed passions of the primitive frontier found fulfillment in the impassioned plea of the preacher and the response he demanded. The Cain Ridge meeting in 1801, for instance, drew crowds estimated from ten thousand to twenty-five thousand people. Camp meeting was here to stay. Employed by Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist alike, it became an integral part of the western revival and soon swept every part of the West.

But camp meeting was not long in coming east. At the beginning of the 19th century the Methodists in New York, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey were already enthusiastic "campers." In West Jersey particularly camp meeting had become something of a mania. One Elder, it is reported, was such an ardent supporter that he practically lived in the woods from June to October.

The situation of the typical camp ground followed a pattern. A camp ground in Forkbridge, New Jersey begun in 1819 and continuing fifteen years was typical. "The tents were constructed of thin pine boards. . . The camp was laid out in a proper square, leaving ample place in the center for the preacher's stand or pulpit, and the 'fire-box,' in which pine knots were burned every night to enlighten the whole camp. The tents were arranged beside each other until the front lines were filled; then a space was allowed for a street, a second row of tents was then erected; . . ." The outer reaches of a Methodist camp came to be known as the "Devil's camp" for here the scoffers gathered.

The earliest camp meeting in the bounds of the present Northern New Jersey Conference was held under the leadership of David Bartine and William McLenahan at the home of Benjamin Munn in 1806 in Parsippany.

Other camp meetings were conducted at Rahway Neck (1818-19); Wolf Hill near Union Village (1824); Spring Garden section of Bloomfield, now Nutley, (1827); Whippanny and Caldwell Circuits, near Centreville, (1836); a Union Camp meeting for the Haverstraw and New Prospect circuits and Paterson Station (1836); Staten Island at the home of W. Winant (1836); Bulls Ferry (1837). Other meetings, though undated, were held at the Roxbury and Pattenburg Circuit, at Wortendyke near Franklin Lakes and at Glenwood or North Vernon in Sussex County.

The founding of the Newark Conference of the Methodist Church in 1857 was coincidental with the resurgence of revivalism and camp meeting enthusiasm especially in the eastern part of our nation. The source of this resurgence laid interestingly enough in the financial crash which shook the country on October 14, 1857.

ABOUT NEW JERSEY METHODISM: - continued

"An era of reckless prosperity vanished in a forenoon. Public confidence was prostrate. Industry stood still. Ruin confronted leaders in finance and business and immediate desperate poverty was the lot of the wage-earner." It was then that the practice of noon-day prayer swept the nation. Springing from the hearts of the people, it was the product of no particular denomination. Known as the Great Prayer Revival, it received the support of the nation's great newspapers and touched the lives of nearly a million people. Thousands were channeled into the churches and the spiritual balance of the American people was restored.

With new vitality the general church began enjoying an advantage not enjoyed for years, namely, a freshened interest on the part of many. How to capitalize upon the opportunity was the question facing the churches. For the newly formed Newark Conference of Methodism their answer was found in the revival of camp meeting. Every Presiding Elder was directed to hold an annual camp meeting on his district. Scarcely nine years late in 1866 amid the planning of celebrations for the Centenary of American Methodism, the Newark Conference in session at Washington, New Jersey appointed a committee to consider the advisability of a Conference Camp Meeting.

The committee moved quickly to its task for the first Conference Camp Meeting was held in August, 1866 at Speedwell Lake between Morris Plains and Morristown. In traditional camp meeting form the services were intensely emotional. The closing evening service "continued until morning and . . . forty souls found peace during the night, and about seventy-five during the last twenty-four hours of the meeting."

Conference Camp Meeting quickly became the fashion. Interest grew steadily.

The attendance during 1867 and 1868 was phenomenal. On the final Sunday of camp meeting in 1867, for instance, Bishop Janes preached to nearly two thousand people. In 1868 it was necessary to have three ministers preaching simultaneously in different parts of the grounds to over fifteen thousand people.

After 1868 the Speedwell Lake camp ground was no longer available. The Conference Committee, consisting of the Rev. J.T. Crane, the Rev. C. Coit and the Hon. Peter Smith, moved the enterprise closer to permanence when they reported and the Conference approved the following: "1. That we deem it important to the interest of Methodism in this Conference to purchase a permanent camp ground; 2. That the payment of twenty dollars or upward shall entitle the subscriber to a lot."

On October 21, 1868 a thirty and one half acre tract, comprising a wooded knoll, was selected. The site was given the Biblical name Mount Tabor. A unique charter was granted by the New Jersey Legislature on March 17, 1869. It provides for the community to function as a municipality within the larger municipality of the township in which it is located. The only other one of its kind is the one held by the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association. The first camp meeting was held August 23 to September 1, 1869. In May 1872 a farm of one hundred acres was added to the original purchase. Since then other tracts of land have been secured.

The camp ground was laid out in tent lots separated by avenues and paths. At the center of the original ground was the Tabernacle facing toward Trinity Circle which was the focal point of all camp meeting activity. Rough plank benches in the park provided seating for the services. The original Tabernacle was nothing more than an outdoor platform and preacher's stand situated at the front of a building used to house the visiting preachers.

## ABOUT NEW JERSEY METHODISM: - continued

The streets and avenues in the camp ground were chiefly named for bishops of the Methodist Church and prominent lay clergymen. Two large tents, later replaced by wooden structures, were erected on either side of Trinity Circle and named Bethel and Ebenezer. They housed many of the smaller meetings during camp meeting. In 1885 the present Tabernacle was erected on the site of the original one. The new structure had indoor seating facilities for 500 persons. An outdoor platform permitted the continuance of open air services.

With the erection of the spacious Arlington Hotel in 1877 Mt. Tabor added a facility unknown to the frontier camp ground. A summer newspaper, The Mount Tabor Record, and the erection of cottages to replace the tents began to give the camp ground an air of permanence. By 1891 the report in the Newark Conference Journal summarized the effects of such establishment. "This change in the character of the ground was invited from the beginning, though probably it was not clearly foreseen. The ground was laid out in lots and sold. Buyers were enticed by eloquent descriptions. . . The natural result is a town of houses and homes in place of a camp ground, and this cannot be reversed."

The spirit of camp meeting evangelism seems to have ebbed by 1891. Only the Holiness meetings under the leadership of Mrs. Osee FitzGerald, mother of Bishop James FitzGerald, continued to represent the old camp meeting fervor. These meetings ceased in 1909 at the time of Mrs. FitzGerald's death.

After 1891 the camp ground, though continuing the forms, changed the focus to that of a religious summer colony where as much time was given to field club and social activity, and to lectures in literature and ancient history as was given to camp meeting. The times were changing from the interests of 1884, for instance, when a day's schedule included: 6 A.M., Morning Prayers, Ebenezer Pavilion; 9 A.M., Family Service; 10:30 A.M., Preaching; 1 P.M., Prayer Meeting, Bethel Pavilion; 2:30 P.M., Preaching; 4 P.M., Children's Hour, Children's Tent; 6 P.M., Young People's Meeting; 7:30 P.M., Preaching. Religious Services were held at Mrs. FitzGerald's cottage at 6 A.M., 1 P.M., and 6 P.M.

Camp meeting as a religious medium in our Conference has come and gone. But the old camp ground at Mount Tabor is worth a visit. The narrow streets and Victorian cottages built on tent lots on the hillside give the impression that it rained houses. The old Tabernacle still remains and across the street is the house which was the original "preaching stand." The FitzGerald cottage, which housed the "holiness"meetings, and was the early residence of Bishop James FitzGerald, is located at the head of Trinity Park. From that park one may climb to the upper lever of the camp ground by way of a set of stairs appropriately called the "golden stairs"! It is a visit into the past when hillsides and forest clearings in our Conference rang with the voices of the preachers, and of persons crying out in their joy of deliverance. Old Mount Tabor stands as an historic shrine and reminder of all those camp meetings which contributed to the strength and growth of American Methodism.

Robert Drew Simpson, Ph.D.  
Senior Pastor of the  
Chatham United Methodist Church  
Chatham, New Jersey

### TRAVELING EXHIBIT ON BISHOP FRANCIS ASBURY

A small exhibit of Asbury memorabilia from the collection of Drew University is available on request for use at special celebrations in local churches. The exhibit includes several mounted prints and photographs, a set of ordination certificates signed by our first Bishop, along with a pair of spectacles he wore. When used with historical items from a local congregation, this makes an attractive addition to an anniversary or other historical observation. Contact Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J. 07940, 377-3000, Ext. 243.

### LOCAL CHURCH RECORDS PROJECT

In order to encourage the gathering and preservation of local church records the Conference Commission is launching a microfilming project for local churches. Expenses would be shared equally between the local church and the Conference Commission. Microfilming would be done at cost by Drew University Library.

Each local church is encouraged to form a Records and History Committee and to begin to gather together from attics and basements, closets and trunks, all available official records (membership, baptisms, marriages, burials, etc.) along with minutes of the most important boards and committees (Administrative Boards, Trustees, United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, Youth Fellowships and their predecessor groups).

A master microfilm file would be maintained in the Conference Archives at Drew. Physical copies may be returned to the local church or be placed on deposit with the Conference Archives as desired. Contact President Paul Spiecker for details.

### LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY CONTEST - Awards to be presented during 1978 Conference

Five local churches - Bayonne, Morristown, Springfield, Union and Walnut Valley - have submitted histories of their churches published during the calendar year 1977 for our fifth annual LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY RECOGNITION CONTEST. Two awards will be presented during the 1978 meeting of the Annual Conference in June.

If your church has published a history of your local church in 1977, we urge you to enter it in this year's contest now. Large or small, pamphlet or cloth bound, mimeographed or printed, all histories printed during 1977 are eligible. Each history will become part of the Conference's permanent collection. MAIL ONE COPY TO: Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J. 07940 by February 1, 1978.

### RETIRED PASTORS

Have you made your tape of reminiscences and your very best sermon for the Conference Archives? If not, contact Paul Spiecker, Hawthorne, for details. Phone: 427-0725.

CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE

- ELIZABETH      The 100th anniversary of St. James Church was marked April 17 by a visit of Bishop C. Dale White. All of the former pastors, active and retired, were invited to participate in the anniversary service.
- HURDTOWN      The historians at the Hurdtown Church have taken the preliminary steps to have that church considered an Historic Site, both by the State and the Federal committees on Historical Sites. The local historians have met with Helen Meyner in seeking help for the designation.
- MORRISTOWN      Morristown Methodists celebrated their 150th anniversary October 16, 1977 with a joyous service of worship. Dr. Henry L. Lambdin, pastor 1946-1953 offered brief historical reflections and Dr. James E. Kirby, Dean of the Theological School of Drew University, delivered the anniversary sermon. A collage, prepared by Helen Yeagle, of the congregation's various church buildings was unveiled on the wall of the courtyard alcove.
- NORTH BERGEN      Trinity United Methodist Church celebrated its 51st anniversary on Sunday, November 6th, with the Rev. Dr. Wilbur Lewis, instructor at Luther College, Teaneck, as guest preacher.
- SPRINGFIELD      Springfield Emanuel Church celebrated its 150th anniversary in October 1977. In 1964 one of Newark's historic German Methodist congregations, Emanuel church, united with the Springfield church. An attractive souvenir publication featuring the history of both congregations was issued.
- TRANQUILITY      For an hour it looked almost like 1802 again when a Methodist Bishop preached atop a pile of hay bales! Celebrating the 175th anniversary of the beginning of Methodism in the Allamuchy and Green area, Bishop C. Dale White preached in a tent to a congregation dressed in colonial costume.
- UNION      Celebration was the key word during October at the Union Church when the congregation marked their 50th anniversary. Bishop C. Dale White visited the Union County church and aided by District Superintendent, John Dexheimer, dedicated memorial gifts and welcomed new members. In addition, a dinner-dance was held for members and friends. The celebrations were climaxed by a homecoming to which returned former pastor Alden Smith and many former members and friends.
- OTHERS?      CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE is a regular column in our newsletter. Won't you share your plans or report on historic celebrations in your church? Please contact the editor and give us your story!

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## BRONZE GRAVE MARKERS FOR UNITED METHODIST MINISTERS

A limited supply of Official Markers for the graves of United Methodist Ministers are available. The bronze markers, which contain a raised figure of a mounted Circuit Rider and the inscription "United Methodist Minister", may be bolted to the head stone or may be implanted in the ground. (Bolts ARE NOT included)

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